

Cheap Eats

by *Daniel Akst*

Throughout history and across disparate cultures, humanity's many conceptions of paradise seem to have a single characteristic in common: free food.

This goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden. Nobody had a smaller grocery bill than Adam and Eve, at least until they succumbed to temptation and ate of the forbidden fruit. Establishing a pattern for exasperated fathers everywhere, Yahweh wrathfully threw these two freeloading flower children out of the Garden and made them go to work for a living—"to till the ground" and eat bread "in the sweat of thy face," as the King James version has it. For the first time in human history, food was going to cost something.

Biblical food-price inflation was severe. Esau, after all, traded his entire birthright for a bowl of porridge—an absurd bargain to be sure, but not at all a bad metaphor for the human condition. Despite a birthright of almost infinite capacities, humanity for much of its history was forced to lay aside self-actualization in favor of the ceaseless struggle to put food on the table. Most of the time and in most places, food was obscenely expensive, requiring almost all of one's waking efforts just to keep body and soul together. In 18th- and 19th-century Europe, for example, chronic malnutrition was widespread (in early-19th-century France, one in five workers had only enough energy to perform three hours of light work daily). As recently as 100 years ago, Americans spent about half their income merely keeping themselves fed.

Those were the days when the phrase "another mouth to feed" was a fearsome prospect indeed. The land of milk and honey, a chicken in every pot, the iron rice bowl—in one form or another, all these locutions express the natural human longing, ever since the Fall, for a place where food was plentiful and cheap. When the English got to the New World, they found it.

In America today, food is cheaper than it has ever been. The Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas reports that in 1919 the average American had to work 158 minutes to buy a three-pound chicken; nowadays, 15 minutes get you the bird. Americans spend less than six percent of their after-tax income on groceries, a figure so low they can afford to spend another four percent eating out. It's likely that in no other country is food as cheap as it is in the United States. The U.S. Department of Agriculture, using 1996 data, reports that the Japanese spend 16 percent of disposable income on food, and the Germans 17 percent. But even those figures pale in comparison with Third World countries. People in India, for example, still spend nearly half their disposable income on food.

Not only is a square meal cheap in this country, it can be prepared with less effort than ever. Harvard University economists David M. Cutler,



Paradise on Earth, by Haitian artist Wilson Bigaud

Edward L. Glaeser, and Jesse M. Shapiro assert that reductions in food preparation time lowered our cost per calorie by 29 percent between 1965 and 1995. In 1919, after all, you not only had to work 158 minutes to earn that chicken; you also had to spend a lot of time plucking it, cooking it, serving it, and cleaning up afterward—instead of just stopping at KFC on the way home from work. As the Harvard trio blandly notes, “This effect could be large enough to explain the increase in consumption we observe.”

But cheap food has come under attack on a number of fronts. In many communities where large, low-priced supermarkets have been planned (including Red Hook, New York, near where I live), serious opposition has sprung up. In addition to raising aesthetic objections, people worry that the new stores will drive out established retailers. Such opposition has occurred even in inner-city and minority neighborhoods where residents have long complained of high prices, limited selection, and few employment opportunities. In the largely black Springfield Gardens section of Queens, New York, for instance, neighborhood opposition delayed the construction of a Pathmark supermarket that now gets rave reviews from residents for, among other things, its prices. The most reliable lightning rod of all, of course, is Wal-Mart, which has become the world’s largest grocer by emphasizing low prices above all else.

Cheap food is in fact scary, and astute observers (most of them well fed)

have long recognized that it implies social change. John Maynard Keynes, writing in the early 1930s, used it as an object lesson in the importance of knowing when to apply “the usual pecuniary tests” and when not. In this case, he was ready to suspend them: “We have until recently conceived it a moral duty to ruin the tillers of the soil and destroy the age-long human traditions attendant on husbandry if we could get a loaf of bread thereby a tenth of a penny cheaper. . . . Today we suffer disillusion, not because we are poorer than we were—on the contrary even today we enjoy, in Great Britain at least, a higher standard of life than at any previous period—but because other values seem to have been sacrificed.”

The English philosopher and farmer Roger Scruton, who is unlikely to spend much time worrying about how he will pay for his next meal, appears to be very worried about where it might be coming from. In a recent essay, he warns that “global food distributors—who can descend like Wal-Mart” (the dread colossus again) “on the periphery of any town anywhere in the world, with a tempting array of cheap food wrapped in plastic—pose a threat to local economies and lifestyles comparable to that posed by a tribe of belligerent invaders.”

It’s a measure of how astonishingly far we have come from the hand-to-mouth existence of our forebears that rock-bottom food prices, once a utopian prospect, are now seen as a threat to the well-being not just of Americans but of countless unwitting foreigners who don’t know enough to temper their relief at not having to go to bed hungry. The latest reason for concern is that, in a single generation, an epidemic of obesity has left three in five Americans overweight. Like so many diseases of late, this one seems to know no borders. Carried by prosperity, the bacillus now reaches from London to Beijing. People are getting fatter all over the world, although nowhere is the trend as pronounced as in this country, where a landscape filled with cheap and very nearly ready-to-eat food—a description that might have applied just as well to the Garden of Eden as to the American suburbs—is now being implicated in the crime. It’s a wonder Adam and Eve never got fat.

Cheap food is not a recent phenomenon in this country, or an insidious corporate plot. On the contrary, if there’s a single salutary trend that has characterized American life throughout our history, it’s been falling food prices. Over time, cheap food has shaped not just our bodies but our country and our culture. Our ability to yank prodigious amounts of calories from the land—and distribute those calories in the most efficient possible way—has affected who we are, how and where we live, and the role we’ve adopted in the world. And, for the most part, the effects have been beneficial.

Enemies of McDonald’s can take some grim solace in the knowledge that America has always been the home of fast food. The earliest Europeans to arrive on these shores were struck by the unbelievable fecundity of the place, even if, like the Puritans, they weren’t particularly adept initially at feeding themselves. Commentators such as John Smith extolled the amplitude

>DANIEL AKST is the author of *St. Burl’s Obituary* (1996), a novel about a fat man who becomes thin. Copyright © 2003 by Daniel Akst.

of game running hither and yon (an early version, perhaps, of Meals on Wheels), while Samuel de Champlain and Jacques Cartier were amazed by the flocks of passenger pigeons that quite literally darkened the sky—and were so quickly and easily caught that they eventually became extinct. In 1607, a settler commenting on the fertility of Virginia called it “nature’s nurse to all vegetables,” while Francis Higginson, writing of New England 21 years later, said that “the abundance of Sea-Fish are almost beyond beleiving.” Comestibles of every type were *bigger* than back home, too, including giant salmon, lobsters, and strawberries. It was as if nature, like some benevolent counter clerk, had taken it upon herself to “supersize” New World portions without being asked.

Thanks in large part to such bounty, America’s food culture has always been more egalitarian than Europe’s, where hunting was a gentleman’s sport and meats were reserved for the gentry. In the New World the common people always ate more meat, starting with the game on which newcomers depended at

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first. By the Revolutionary War, Americans had achieved a level of meat consumption not reached in Europe until the mid-1900s, when World War II food rationing actually improved the diet of the English working class.

Strong evidence for the early superiority of the American diet comes in the form of data on human height. In developing countries today, height is a pretty good predictor of productivity rates—even in the modern U.S. economy, tall people earn more money—just as it is a pretty good indicator of nutrition standards. “Americans achieved modern heights by the middle of the 18th century,” writes economist Robert W. Fogel, a Nobel laureate, adding that “they reached levels of life expectancy not attained by the general population of England or even by the British peerage until the first quarter of the 20th century. The early attainment of modern stature and relatively long life expectancy is surprising. Yet it is by no means unreasonable. By the second quarter of the 18th century, Americans had achieved diets that were remarkably nutritious by European standards, and particularly rich in protein.”

To the extent Europeans were eating better, New World crops get some of the credit. Who could imagine Italian cooking without the tomato, or Ireland without the potato? The historian Lynn Harry Nelson notes that an acre which yielded 600 pounds of wheat to a medieval peasant could later yield 50,000 pounds of potatoes. “If the introduction of potatoes produced a caloric revolution,” Nelson writes, “the acceptance of corn brought about a protein revolution” by providing 1,800 pounds of animal feed from an acre. “The Europeans, in turn, introduced corn into Africa and sweet potatoes in China, where these new foods also changed conditions dramatically.”

America’s bounty, like its freedoms, has long made it a magnet for immigrants. People who choose to uproot themselves and come to America are often hungry metaphorically as well as literally. Short immigrants tend to have



taller children, and gargantuan family meals seem to be a feature of the lore of virtually every immigrant ethnic group here, including my own—proving once again that any paradise, even the remembered paradise of Grandma’s house on a holiday, is well vilted almost by definition. Of course, in coming to America for its famous bounty, immigrants have also contributed to that bounty. Northern Europeans who planted their skills and energy in the Midwest helped it grow into the world’s breadbasket. Mexican immigrants drove down the cost of farm labor in California, which helped make fruit and vegetables cheaper. Immigrants such as Jurgis Rudkus, the tragic protagonist of Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* (1906), took jobs in the packing, canning, and



“Strive mightily, but eat and drink as friends,” Shakespeare advised. These men at a 1901 banquet for New York theatrical producer Harrison Fiske implemented the advice with gusto.

processing plants that were further reducing the cost of calories through their relentless industrialization of American food.

All praise and hosannas to organic farming cooperatives and the like, but at the risk of culinary philistinism let’s also say a little something on behalf of the Armour brothers, Joseph Campbell, Gustavus Swift, and all the other legends of American agribusiness who helped make it possible for the great mass of people to eat their fill affordably. Their companies brought technology—railroads, refrigeration, assembly lines, and the like—to food production and distribution, with profitable results for themselves and, it might be argued, for their customers. One of the things they accomplished, after

all, was to reduce food preparation time, a development to which housewives seemed not to object. By the 1920s, in a pattern that would persist to this day, Americans were getting more choices at lower prices than ever before.

They also got bigness and homogeneity, as critics complained long before Roger Scruton. These trends would later be amplified by yet another transformative technology—television—but not before the government did its part. As *The Jungle* made painfully clear to Theodore Roosevelt and Congress nearly a century ago, government has a role to play in safeguarding the food supply, to say nothing of the food workers. But mandatory meat inspection, pure food laws, and food safety regulations had the unintended consequences of encouraging bigness and elevating barriers to new firms. The historian Harvey Levenstein notes, for instance, that pasteurization laws led to a rapid consolidation in the milk business: “In Detroit there were 158 milk dealers when the pasteurization law was passed. Within three months the number declined to 68.”

Reduced competition didn’t make food any cheaper, and other government policies—intended to support farm prices and otherwise aid agriculture—actually made it more expensive. James Bovard, a journalist who has spent a lot of time chronicling America’s expensive and contradictory farm programs, has calculated that during President Bill Clinton’s term of office, federal farm policies cost taxpayers more than \$230 billion, in addition to which these policies raised food prices by more than \$110 billion. Bovard figures that if you put those two numbers together, the government could have bought all the farmland in 35 states.

In 1996 President Clinton signed a bill that was supposed to phase out agricultural subsidies. But the Republican administration that succeeded him, sworn enemy of big government though it may be, has added billions of dollars and many years of life to the farm subsidy programs, despite their detrimental effects on the environment, food prices, and the small farms most taxpayers might think they are supporting. These programs, which date back to the New Deal and beyond, largely benefit agribusiness and are often wildly irrational. Over the years, various government programs have benefited tobacco growers even as the government sought to discourage smoking, and artificially raised milk prices while leaving soda prices to the marketplace. I encountered my favorite such episode in 1991, when California was having a terrible drought. At the time, Washington was expensively encouraging farmers in dry parts of the state to grow rice—which requires inches of standing water—and then subsidizing its export to dispose of the surpluses this policy was producing. Yet state officials in Sacramento were struggling to cope with the drought by means of a farm program of their own: They were offering to pay these same farmers *not* to grow rice.

But if government farm programs have raised food prices, other government actions—opening the West, for example, or providing funds for massive water projects, agricultural research, and the rural electrification of the 1930s—have had the opposite effect. Farmers suffered during the 1920s and 1930s, but for most Americans in the Great Depression food wasn’t cheap enough. And nobody complained about the low cost of food during the two world wars. The motto of Herbert Hoover’s U.S. Food Administration when



Farm subsidies in Europe and America help make food cheap and plentiful but they also make it harder for farmers in developing countries to compete at home and in world markets.

the doughboys were sent to Europe the first time around was “Food Will Win the War.” Food undoubtedly helped.

After World War II, technology accelerated the centralized processing of food, which helped pave the way for women to pursue paid work outside the home. Women’s magazines, incidentally, reflect the increasing affordability of food over time. Little more than a generation ago, it was common for these journals to feature budget-conscious recipes and advice for reusing leftovers. Since then, food-oriented editorial fare has undergone a radical shift toward dishes that seem to take no account whatsoever of cost in their pursuit of the novel and delicious. The rise of modern cooking porn has made it easy to overlook the importance of innovators such as Clarence Birdseye, who pioneered frozen foods. Better packaging allowed prepared foods to be better preserved. “Cole Porter,” writes historian Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, “included cellophane in his list of ‘the tops,’ along with a summer night in Spain, the National Gallery, and Garbo’s salary. By 1959 Americans were spending \$2.7 billion annually on frozen foods.”

Any freshman economics student can tell you that if people eat for less, more money is available for other things, including steel mills, interstate highways, movies, and babies. Consider housing. Lower food prices freed household funds for homeownership (Americans have the highest homeownership rate in the world), even as increased agricultural efficiency freed up land. Although the relentless market forces that drive down our food costs have been blamed for despoiling the environment, these forces may also play a role in preserving it. As Yale University economist Robert E. Evenson observes, “In the United States, low food prices are associated with ‘high-yield, high-input’ agriculture. High-yield agriculture means less

land devoted to crops and pasture. This means less habitat destruction.”

Vast amounts of land have always made food more affordable here than elsewhere, but America is continually producing more food on less territory. Since 1920, land devoted to farming in this country has decreased from nine acres per capita to just four. The farm population, by the way, is down to a mere two percent of Americans, all of them evidently supremely productive,

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which leaves the rest of us well fed yet free for other pursuits—such as generating the wealth, skills, and knowledge that will further drive down the real cost of food. Some of us are even free to create art or become philosophers.

Of course, all this change is not without cost. Far from rejoicing at their escape from what Marx called “the idiocy of rural life,” many Americans miss this connection to the land, as well as the ethos associated with it. Thus, as farmland turns to suburb, we take some of the vast nonfarm income we produce and use it to recapitulate, in our backyards and lawns, the agrarian heritage that many of us are nostalgic for but that most of us have never experienced firsthand.

It’s in those sprawling suburbs, ironically enough, that America’s long love affair with cheap food may have met its match. Out there, you drive everywhere—especially to fast-food restaurants, giant supermarkets, and vast club stores that sell all manner of groceries in Brobdingnagian sizes. Out there, the cost of food in relation to income is probably at its lowest. And out there, people are fat.

The question now is whether the cost of America’s long and rewarding relationship with cheap food is starting to outweigh the benefits. “The single most important problem with food in this country is that it is vastly overproduced,” says New York University’s Marion Nestle, a nutrition expert. “The single most important nutritional problem is obesity. These issues are clearly related, and cheap food is a factor in both. Food companies compete fiercely for our food dollars and do everything they can to induce us to eat their products and to eat more food, regardless of the effects on waistlines and health.”

The economist and Nobel laureate Amartya Sen has observed that famines don’t happen in free societies, where governments are more responsive to the people and less likely to get in the way of the economic system. With its smothering plenty, America seems to be testing the converse of Sen’s thesis: Is a free society more likely to do itself in by overeating? Are we doomed by the relentless logic of overproduction and overconsumption? I doubt it. Overproduction is a longstanding characteristic of U.S. agriculture. Technology—and therefore efficiency—has long outpaced population growth, and government programs to cope with the problem have often made it worse. Yet the size of America’s waistline was relatively stable

until around 1980. In the past 20 years, though, the proportion of Americans who are obese has swelled to 31 percent; another 34 percent are merely fat.

A lot has changed since 1980, enough to give ammunition to proponents of almost every possible theory as to why we're getting so fat. One simple answer is that we're eating more. Even allowing for imports and exports, the U.S. food system produces 500 calories more per person per day than it did in the 1970s. And surveys of people's eating habits suggest that they're taking in more calories, partly because they're eating out more and restaurant portion sizes have exploded. "Portion sizes began to grow in the 1970s, rose sharply in the 1980s, and have continued in parallel with increasing body weights," says a study by Nestle and her NYU colleague Lisa R. Young. Science writer Ellen Ruppel Shell notes that from 1970 to 1997, annual soda consumption rose from 21 to 56 gallons per American. "It is a staggering fact," she writes, "that in the last decade, soda eclipsed coffee and tap water *combined* as the American beverage of choice."

Reductions in food preparation time also offer a partial explanation for obesity. Americans started to get fat around the time the microwave oven became ubiquitous, and today they spend more money than ever on prepared foods and restaurant meals, which eliminate cooking altogether. In my own household no one is fat, but the advent of a single prepared food, Hormel precooked bacon, could threaten the waistline status quo.

Bacon was something we rarely cooked at home. It was fatty and time consuming to prepare, and it made a mess of the stove—plus you had to do something afterwards with all that grease. But when my sons came along, with their elephantine appetites, bacon somehow became a favorite food, and we tried a package of the precooked variety. The taste was shockingly not bad. You can microwave a plateful in a minute or less, serve it to a pair of ravenous six-year-olds before school, and leave cleanup to the dishwasher. In fact, I am willing to risk my bobo credentials here by asserting that, once you get the hang of it, precooked bacon is a damned sight better than no bacon at all. But now that bacon is available not just on occasional lazy Sundays but every day of the week, that's how often my sons want it. Bacon-and-tomato sandwiches have become a plausible lunch item, and a turkey club is no longer a rare indulgence (meaning we eat more store-bought mayonnaise, too). But to understand the true magnitude of what's going on here, you need to know that an eight-ounce package of precooked bacon is equal to *three pounds* of the stuff raw, and around our house the three males have something approaching a two-pack-a-week habit. Food technology and bad parenting, in other words, have combined to take our weekly bacon consumption from zero to five pounds almost overnight.

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We make amends by never setting foot in a fast-food restaurant, something that separates my kids from their peers as effectively as a pair of antlers. Consider that the number of fast-food eateries per capita in this country doubled between 1972 and 1997 (while the per capita number of full-service restaurants rose 35 percent). The fare at these places is cheap and fattening, and linked to the lack of time or energy for cooking. Economists Shin-Yi Chou, Henry Saffer, and Michael Grossman contend that the fast-food boom results from the massive movement of women into jobs outside the home, a movement that has caused the very people who traditionally did all the cooking to have much less time to cook. In analyzing the relationship of weight to incomes, food prices, work force participation, and other variables, the economists conclude that the growing prevalence of fast food is to blame for 68 percent of the increase in American obesity. And in a somewhat complementary study for the Joint Center for Policy Research, researchers assert that there's a link between maternal employment and overweight children: The more hours a mother works in a week, the greater the likelihood of her having an overweight child. Roger Scruton and likeminded critics may be on to something when they condemn the shift from eating to feeding, stripped of all ceremony and social significance.

The carbohydrate school, meanwhile, focuses on that classic fat target, expert advice. For years, experts and government officials have been telling us to eat more carbohydrates, and for years Americans have been doing just that. Now some people are beginning to wonder whether this is the problem in a nutshell: that maybe we need fewer carbs and more—are you ready for this?—fat. One theory is that refined carbohydrates and starches might themselves be the cause of excessive hunger. What's observably true is that, as Americans have shifted their diets from fats toward carbohydrates in recent years, they have only gained weight.

On the other side of the balance sheet, it's very likely that Americans aren't putting out calories the way they used to, thanks largely to technological change, especially the reconstruction of society around the automobile, the television, and the computer. More Americans than ever live in places where walking isn't even an option, and some part of the national weight problem can probably be laid at the door of traffic engineers, zoning officials, real estate developers, and others responsible for the sprawl that has covered much of the landscape in the past generation. Darius Lakdawalla and Tomas Philipson, two more economists, in effect blame technology for obesity. They argue that about 40 percent of the growth in weight in the last 20 years is due to the increased supply of food (higher incomes, lower prices), while 60 percent is due to more sedentary employment. Once upon a time, physical exertion was what you got paid to do. Now you get paid to talk on the phone and type on a computer.

And in the category of “no good deed goes unpunished,” efforts to get people to stop smoking may also be making them fatter. A 1995 study in the *New*

England Journal of Medicine blamed giving up smoking for about a quarter of the increase in the number of overweight men during a recent 10-year period, and for about a sixth of the increase in the number of overweight women. Remember, too, that smoking has grown a lot more expensive even as food has gotten cheaper. Is it so far-fetched to think that, for those in search of some oral gratification, a little simple substitution might be going on?

Given the transformative effects of cheap food and the extent to which they are identified with the broad American culture, a backlash was perhaps inevitable: Some consumers have indicated a willingness to pay higher prices for what they eat. A recent poll of food attitudes found 71 percent of Americans claiming that they wouldn't mind paying more to buy food grown near where they live or food grown in ways that protect the environment. While it's hard to believe that none of these Americans are to be found at Wal-Mart, their sentiments are manifesting themselves in the marketplace. Retail sales of organic foods, which cost considerably more than regular items, are growing at a torrid pace. The Department of Agriculture expects them to hit \$20 billion a year by 2005, up from \$1 billion in 1990.

Farmers, meanwhile, are connecting directly with consumers as part of the Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) movement, in which individuals contract with farmers for a season, sometimes paying for food in advance and taking on risk by agreeing that their money is nonrefundable even if the crop fails. "I think farmers ask much too little of the people who buy their food," an organic farmer from upstate New York named Elizabeth Henderson tells the Department of Agriculture in a publication called *The New American Farmer*. "They don't ask them to pay enough or to contribute in other ways." On Henderson's farm, which sells food to subscribers under a CSA model, people don't only write checks. They come out and do some work.

Physical work—physical activity of some kind—is probably the best hope for all of us. We need to get out of our cars and expend some calories, maybe even reconsider this idea of flinging car-oriented subdivisions all over the place. Food is a lot of things, but it's mainly fuel, and given the unlikelihood of famine in this country, there's little point in having all the citizens carrying around their private strategic energy reserves in rolls of fat on their bodies. Nor is food as cheap as it seems once you factor in the yearly costs of obesity—perhaps \$100 billion or more in medical bills, perhaps 300,000 premature deaths—as well as the direct and indirect costs of agricultural subsidies, government-sanctioned produce cartels, and the like. These costs fall disproportionately on the poor, who are more likely than others to be fat even though food is most expensive to those with the least income. A better accounting might help us appreciate the costs and benefits of cheap food, which has helped make America the richest and most powerful nation on earth, even as it has spurred social and technological achievements inconsistent with the genetic legacy of a species designed to spend a lot less time on its duff. □